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SYRIA ON THE PEACE TABLE

By Khalil A. Totah, A.M., a native of Jerusalem, Syria

I

It is with hesitant tread that the writer enters into this discussion of the disposition of Syria after the war. At the outset he means to guard his statements with diligent reserve and clothe his expression with measured and modest robes. Gregory Mason spoke for us all when he said that only a fool dared prophesy, nowadays.

Responsible public statements as to what shall be done with Syria are conspicuously lacking. There are a few official references, however, although somewhat vague and unsatisfactory, which may be quoted with some profit. The Allies' terms in answer to President Wilson, January 10, 1917, demand, "The enfranchisement of populations subject to the bloody tyranny of the Turks; the expulsion from Europe of the Ottoman Empire." The first clause certainly includes Syria.

Lloyd George stated, in his speech at Glasgow, June 29, 1917:

As to Mesopotamia it is not and never has been Turkish. . . . What is to happen to Mesopotamia must be left to the peace conference and there is one thing that will never happen to it, it will never be restored to the blasting tyranny of the Turks. The same observation applies to Armenia.

Paul Milukov the former foreign minister of Russia's Provisional Government is quoted as saying:

We are to have Constantinople. Nothing else is possible, whatever may be the outcome of the war, the future of Turkey must be definitely settled. Palestine must come under some form of international government. I do not believe that Palestine has been promised to France. Asia Minor must be divided into different spheres of influence.

These confessions were made by Milukov to Dr. Aked, one of the Ford ship pilgrims, and reported in the *Independent* for September 25, 1916. That weekly added, moreover, that Milukov made the above statement after a fresh conference with Sir Edward Grey. Such frankness is of itself disquieting; for it is not customary among the well-informed diplomats to tell what they know. One cannot help wondering why Sir Edward Grey never committed himself publicly if he were willing to have Dr. Milukov speak for him.

As reported by the *New York Times* August 24, 1917, Michaelis, the new German Chancellor, asserted that the Allies in 1915-1916 decided, among other things that Mesopotamia was to be England's share, and that the rest of Turkey in Asia was to be divided into English and French spheres of influence. Palestine was to be internationalized and the other districts inhabited by the Turks and Arabs, including Arabia proper and the holy places of Islam, were to be formed into a special federation of state under British suzerainty. Michaelis further adds that when Italy entered the war she demanded her share of the booty. Michaelis' assertion, be it noted, is not unlike Milukov's understanding of the situation.

II

"The shallow murmurs but the deep is dumb." Amateurs and journalists speak but premiers and ministers are silent. Answerable heads of state deem it wiser to say as little as possible, but the mob has already settled the fate of Syria a hundred times over. Surely, it is said, Russia will get Armenia, France acquire Syria, and England fly the Union Jack over Mesopotamia and Palestine. Many editors and public men seem more certain of such an outcome than do cabinets and war councils.

Under the caption "Possible Peace Terms" the *Independent* of January 1, 1917, sanely speculates thus:

| <i>Allies Demands</i> | <i>German Concessions</i> |
|----------------------------|---------------------------|
| Constantinople to Russia | Will be refused |
| France to get Syria | Will be refused |
| England to get Mesopotamia | Will be opposed |
| Russia to get Armenia | May be conceded. |

Says Sir Sidney Low in the *Fortnightly Review* (July 1917) "In one form or another a group of free Arab states under British and French protection will be established between the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea and the Mediterranean." In the same journal for May, Colonel Sir Thomas H. Holdich, K.C.M.G., ably discusses, "The Future Frontiers of Turkey,"—an article no student of the Near East can afford to miss. Colonel Holdich believes that the Turk must return from Europe. Syria he says is out of the question for his final resting place. Anatolia with either Smyrna or Brusa for a capital, is the only logical home for him. "Should we win the war as we mean to win it," writes Sir Holdich, "the Turk must depart from Jerusalem and the supremacy of a Christian government must be assured to Palestine." James Bryce is quoted by the press as advocating an international control of Palestine and making the country a sort of a religious museum for all nations. Arnold Toynbee recommends the creation of a New Arabia under British control. In *Nationality and the War* (London, 1915) he almost ignores the existence of Syria as such and treats it as a possible province of a New Arabia. For the sovereign of such a kingdom he suggests "some prince of the reigning Ottoman house." Rihany, a Syrian writer, discussed in the *Forum* (1916) the rise of a "Young Arabia" with Egypt as a base and an Egyptian sultan as the Khalif of Islam. Under the title "The Holy Land; Whose to Have and to Hold" in the *Bookman* (September, 1917) the same author leaves the beaten paths and offers a novel solution which is not lacking in originality and some measure of naïvete. He says, "It is to the interest of neither Palestine nor civilization that any of the great Powers occupy the land." He discusses Zionism as a possible solution, and then asks "Are we to have another conquest to be followed by another war or another crusade?" To this query he replies, "Modern civilization says, No! The spirit of democracy says, No. The chastened conscience of the world says, No! No! Neither England nor Italy nor any other European Power should enter Palestine as a conqueror but as a liberator."

Then he concludes, "If none of the great European Powers should occupy it and if the Zionists should not be permitted to establish there a Jewish state, who then shall be the ruler and benign genius of the land?" The question is finally settled by leaving it to Europe or America to give Palestine a "disinterested and idealistic spirit" free from foreign interference, which will weld Moslem Christian and Jew "into a common national bond" and give the country the blessings of a modern administration.

III

Such then is official reticence and popular outspokenness regarding Syria's future. If popular favor and editorial comment could control direct governmental action; if diplomacy were guided by moral sentiment and an enlightened conscience, Turkey's knell would have been tolled long before the world tragedy was staged, and Syria would have been under some respectable form of government.

The one factor that seems to determine the course of governments is Interest. In our case it is not the interest of Syria that will loom large in the minds of those who will sit around the peace table. Britain says much about the *human* side of Armenia, Syria, Poland and the rest. She could have emancipated the Syrians and the Armenians from "the blasting tyranny of the Turks" years ago but it was not for *her* interest to do so. In 1799 Britain allied herself with Turkey against Napoleon and drove him out of Syria. In 1840 Great Britain befriended the Turk against Ibrahim Pasha, the Egyptian suzerain. In the Crimean War England fought side by side with the Moslem to check Russia. In 1878 Britain came to the rescue and saved Constantinople from the onrush of the Slavs. Great Britain could have done more to stop the massacre of Armenians and relieve Syrians, but she had a higher interest—that of keeping Russia away from her path.

It is even safe to state that had Turkey joined the Allies, little would have been said, in Entente circles, about her "blasting tyranny" and still less about carving her up on

the peace table. But now that Turkey is in bad company and as long as she is well worthy of complete disintegration Great Britain will do her share in serving the interests of humanity by annihilating her.

The mighty voice of imperial interests thunders in the midst of official silence. Let us see which of the Entente has the most vital interest in Syria. Start with the British Isles, enter the strait and pause a moment before Gibraltar. Proceed to Malta, keep right on to Cyprus and then meditate a bit longer. Now take a southerly route into the Suez Canal and incidentally mark Egypt. Sail on to Aden, take a look at the Persian Gulf, then face Colombo, India, and Australia. Ponder well and long! What is this but a trade route that Britain must keep open at all costs? This is an artery in the British system that must be protected. Syria is only an incident. Of itself it is not worth much but its position is unquestionably worth a good deal. It is a bridge that has always been needed to join East and West. Moreover it happens to flank the all-important canal. With Syria in hostile hands and a railway running through it and joining Orient with Occident the canal would at once lose its value. In such a light, the fate of Syria—or its southern part at least—is fairly clear. It seems plausible to the author that Britain will begin with Suez, take as much of Palestine as she can and penetrate into Syria as far north as she is permitted.

That was why:

1. England checkmated Germany at Koweit and blocked her passage to the Persian Gulf; and today is in Bagdad and intends to keep it.

2. Britain prevented Turkey from reaching Akabah, in the head of the Red Sea, by rail. A railway to Akabah would have connected the Mediterranean ports with the Red Sea and thus created a serious menace to the canal.

3. That was why England always opposed the extension of Syrian railways to the Egyptian frontier.

4. That is why British troops are in Palestine today and are 50 miles from Jerusalem—balked, it is said, more by

the jealous opposition of its Allies than by Turkish resistance.

These facts speak aloud even though the British cabinet is silent on the subject.

IV

The feeble words, the loud efforts of the allies in Turkey, and the interpretation of both by scores of men of all ranks lead to but one conclusion: That the Turk must depart from Syria. This is negative to be sure, but the very negation of it is comforting indeed. Anything would be an improvement on the Turk. To repeat, then let us emphasize our negative conclusion that most likely Syria will no longer remain Turkish.

But if it is not to remain Turkish, what will it become? This query is not easily answered. Instead of a dogmatic, risky positive conclusion a *conjecture* may be offered based on the above facts.

Of all the Allies, Britain is most vitally concerned in our problem. So frequently has she gotten what she wanted that it is not improbable that she will consolidate Arabia, Egypt, Syria and Mesopotamia under one "New Arabia." This would be beneficial to the countries in question. As a Syrian, the writer would deem this settlement satisfactory provided some measure of autonomy is given to the different countries. At the same time it is difficult to think of giving England so much and France nothing.

It is very likely that there will be disagreement as to the disposition of Palestine. So perhaps rather than arouse ill-will the Powers will choose internationalization for Palestine. Zionism is another alternative in case of discord. Jewish influences in Britain and America are being consolidated to bring about a Jewish state. It may be that Hebrew cash will tip the scales.

Let it be mentioned, here, that Zionism is unpopular with both Christian and Moslem in Syria, but unfortunately this will not weigh much at the peace conference.

To either internationalization or Zionism, Britain might be reconciled, since the new buffer state in Palestine would partially protect her canal.

It is useless to attempt the presentation of the Syrians' wishes and opinions regarding the future of their country, for they will not be considered. The *Interest* of the *Powers* only matters. Suffice it to say for the Syrians, that they will not shed many tears in bidding a final farewell to their old friend and benefactor—the terrible Turk.

This is not telling the exact fate of Syria on the peace table but who dare say more?